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### TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

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# A fresh approach for a classic love story

By Richard Duckett

The music of the great 20th-century American opera "Porgy and Bess" has gloriously endured for 75 years. The love story itself is a memorable one. Tackling the staging, however, offers some challenges.

Certain images from the opera that debuted in 1935 have seemed to perpetuate an unacceptable stereotype. Poor African-Americans in Charlestown, S.C., drugs, fighting, a prostitute, a pitiful beggar, ragged clothes ...

"Being the iconic piece that it is, I was aware it has had a very storied and troubled history in the black community," said Charles Randolph-Wright. "The images — will we ever get past those images?"



**Director Charles Randolph-Wright said his approach to the opera has been from a 2010 lens of someone who grew up in South Carolina**

Randolph-Wright thinks he has. He's directing a special 75th anniversary production of "Porgy and Bess" that he's proud of and which is getting standing ovations as it tours the country. The new production comes to The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts Saturday and Sunday for two

performances presented by Music Worcester Inc.

Randolph-Wright had never directed "Porgy and Bess" before, but "I've always known about it," he said. Besides loving the music, he has a perspective that is particularly germane for someone taking it on. He's black, and born and raised in South Carolina.

During a telephone interview, he said his approach to the opera has been from a "2010 lens of someone who grew up in South Carolina ... This is my family. I really know these people."

Randolph-Wright has written and directed for the stage, and also directed television and film in a busy career. He recently directed the movie "Mama, I Want to Sing" (starring Lynn Whitfield, Ciara and Patti LaBelle), which will be released later this year. He hadn't planned on taking on "Porgy and Bess" until he was introduced by a friend to Michael Capasso, the producer of the opera's 75th anniversary tour. Capasso is no stranger to people here. His National Lyric Opera of New York brings two productions a year to Worcester under the auspices of Opera Worcester.

"Porgy and Bess" features music by George Gershwin, libretto by DuBose Heyward and lyrics by Ira Gershwin and Heyward based on Heyward's novel "Porgy." Set in a poor black segregated community in Charlestown, Porgy is a crippled beggar who can see the inherent sweetness of Bess whose main man has fled (but promised to return) after killing someone in a fight. The ensuing relationship will not be easy, with no simple resolution. Among the famous songs are the incomparable "Summertime," along with "I Got Plenty o' Nuthin," "It Ain't Necessarily So," and "I Loves You Porgy."

In the early years of the opera there was criticism by several prominent blacks about the threadbare depiction of the characters. Harry Belafonte declined the role of Porgy in the 1959 movie. "I think the main thing (about the criticism), you have these images — prostitutes, cripples — there is no great balance," Randolph-Wright said. "Once they approached me about doing it, I researched it and started getting my own view of the story."

At museums in Charlestown he looked at photographs of black communities from the

time the opera is set, and he even looked at pictures from his own family (Randolph-Wright is originally from York, S.C.). "I have these images where they were dressed incredibly," he said. "That's a visual approach." In his production, people "are not hideously dressed. I told them, no burlap on the stage. We see them on the stage in their nice clothes. They may be a little frayed, but you're aware that they made an effort to look nice."

A key scene is a picnic. "You know this is their favorite outfit. When you see that, you see the respect they have for each other," Randolph-Wright said.

The costumes are a way to "find the dignity in the people" and from that help draw believable characters and a believable love story, he said. "Porgy is not such a tragic, pitiful character. Yes, he's a beggar, but he's very smart. It doesn't have to be one-dimensional."

Randolph-Wright said his research brought him closer to the characters. "I love that, to be able to find the authenticity and delve into the composer's realm."

Many in the current cast of "Porgy and Bess" have been in the opera before (there aren't that many American operas for blacks, Randolph-Wright noted). But in discussing the work with them, everybody took a "clean slate" approach and asked, "Who are these people? What is this world?" The result? "The performers are truly extraordinary. I'm moved every time I see this."

Audience reactions, in turn, "have been tremendous." One person asked Randolph-Wright if the piece had been rewritten. No. But for the director who had just staged it, "that's the ultimate compliment," he said.

As part of a grant from The Hanover Insurance Group Foundation, more than 100 11th-graders from the Worcester public schools will attend Sunday's performance. Students on Sunday will also be given lunch and a tour of the theater and get to interact with the "Porgy and Bess" cast and crew. The foundation grant is in partnership with Music Worcester and The Hanover Theatre.